

Like the Olympics, education is not always about winning

Let's measure – and reward – learning for the effort put in and how students challenge themselves.

Arnoud De Meyer

With more than 10,700 participants in the 2024 Olympic Games and 4,400 in the Paralympics, about 12,500 will go home without a medal. Would that mean they have failed?

Of course not. All worked very hard to be able to participate, and gave the absolute best of themselves. As Pierre de Coubertin, the French father of the modern Olympics, said: "The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part; the essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well."

There is something from this galactic sporting event that we can apply to education.

In Singapore, this is the period of graduation and commencement ceremonies. At our institutes of higher learning, we will hear the applause for the valedictorians, the salutatorians and other winners of awards for academic achievement. I also congratulate them.

But as with the Olympic Games, I also want to praise all who

studied hard and graduated. It is the culmination of their entire education so far. I want to praise them for the effort they put in to learn, and to enhance their ability to learn, for the rest of their lives.

The expression "institutes of higher learning" is used to describe Singapore's universities, polytechnics and ITE (Institute of Technical Education), and implies that the purpose is about learning. However, that is difficult to measure. Academic awards – right through Singapore's education system – recognise the ability to shine through tests, exams, project work, class participation, and the like.

But gauging the learning through these tests is notoriously inadequate and, at best, lopsided.

Sure, the system is moving to shift the focus away from grades and provide multiple pathways for students to achieve their goals as well as more opportunities for them to progress.

However, as we aim to broaden the definition of success, a significant part of "success" needs to be about rewarding effort across all levels of education. There needs to be a much more

multifaceted approach to measuring learning.

WHY THERE NEEDS TO BE CHANGE

Students have different abilities and talents. I strongly believe that it is the task of educators to help them improve those talents, whatever their initial level. The ultimate objective for a student should not be to shine through his abilities, but to increase and hone his abilities through effort. The student who really should be rewarded is the one who puts in the highest effort and learns the most.

I remember a conversation with one of our academically very successful students about his choice of electives. He had opted for ones known to be relatively easy and where he could get a top grade with limited effort. He admitted he did so to avoid affecting his grade point average (GPA), a risk if he opted for one of the more demanding electives.

I lectured him that with his abilities, he should challenge himself and invest in enhancing those abilities. I have more respect for a student who chooses challenging electives where he can learn more, accepting that he may end up with a lower GPA. But I also understand that many students are discouraged from taking such risks in a results-driven education system or society.

Another issue when it comes to learning is that we all suffer from confirmation bias. When there is a subject or a discipline we believe we are not good at, the failures we encounter will reinforce those beliefs. We give up and lose all interest in the subject.

I worked with many students who were convinced they were not good at mathematics. Each failed exercise or setback in solving a problem requiring analytical skills only reinforced their aversion to the subject. Yet, I

A successful graduate is more than a person who masters a few disciplines. A successful graduate has also learnt how to work in teams; can appreciate the value of differences in culture, ethnicity and religion; has built up useful networks; and may have improved skills in leadership and organisation through the experience of co-curricular activities, among other things.

have seen the opposite happening when committed educators help these students to perceive these failed exercises as challenges to put in more effort.

Isn't that what the coaches of our sportsmen and sportswomen do? I am sure each Olympian at times doubted his abilities and had thoughts of giving up, but his coaches helped him overcome this. Educators should emulate what these coaches practise, to neutralise students' confirmation bias.

Importantly, we also need to educate our students in a more holistic way. Measuring the success in developing a young person as a whole cannot be done through purely academic performance measures.

A successful graduate is more than a person who masters a few disciplines. A successful graduate has also learnt how to work in teams; can appreciate the value of differences in culture, ethnicity and religion; has built up useful networks; and may have improved skills in leadership and organisation through the experience of co-curricular activities, among other things.

NEW WAYS TO MEASURE SUCCESS

We need a more multifaceted approach to measuring learning success: measuring and rewarding effort should be part of it. My former colleagues at Singapore Management University have invested in developing systems where students define their learning objectives and then measure the progress they make over the course of a term. They use data analytics to track and analyse learner's progress, engagement and, yes, performance, over time.

When successful, this can lead to adaptive learning systems where educators, supported by artificial intelligence, can adapt content and the assessments to the individual student's efforts and learning achievements, also providing more personalised feedback.

I am also a supporter of peer evaluation, self-assessment and reflection by the students. This is not easy to implement, as it is

often difficult to get students to be honest with themselves.

And we need to develop students' skills in providing peer feedback. In peer evaluation, there is always the risk of "if you scratch my back, I will scratch yours" – which translates to, "let's be overly kind in evaluating ourselves and our friends". Yet in some courses, I was able to convince students that honest feedback by their peers, with whom they had worked endless hours in project teams, was often more valuable than my observations as a professor.

One of the disadvantages of tests and exams is that you don't know how much the students retain. They study hard, cram all the knowledge in their head for the exam, and forget most of it after the exam. Attempting to measure the longer-term retention should be one of our goals in the institutes of higher learning.

There is also a need to measure the outcomes of this holistic approach to learning. What are the positive changes in the student's behaviour, how well did problem-solving skills and critical thinking improve? Is the student more confident, and resilient, and have his social interaction skills improved?

Of course, the ultimate measurement is how well the student achieves the objectives he sets himself after graduation.

I sincerely wish that our institutes of higher learning continue developing a multifaceted approach to measuring students' progress and provide reports that are far more complete than the current degree scrolls. I also hope that faculty – and teachers throughout the education system – will see their role as coaches to guide and support the effort of the students. Let's develop learning like the Olympic Games: Some of the Olympians will go home with a medal, but all of them will have been part of an incredibly exciting experience.

• Arnoud De Meyer is professor emeritus of Singapore Management University and a member of Insead's board of directors.